

How Mindful Children React Differently to Challenges (Illustrated)



Growing up, I was a firecracker. I reacted quickly to situations and never hesitated to express my "passionate" opinions. This often led to hurt feelings. I remember once, after a heated discussion with my brother, he asked my parents to put a coffee filter over my mouth to "keep the yucky stuff inside."

My dad later took me aside and said, "Renee, you need to think before you speak. You're going to hurt people with that sharp tongue. This is something I really want you to work on."

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I replied. "I feel things, and then I just say them. Why don't you understand? Why doesn't anyone understand?" Then I yelled, "I JUST CAN'T HELP IT!"

Whoops. I did it again.

My dad seemed upset, but he didn't speak. It was so quiet that I could hear him breathing. Finally, he said, "Did you see what I just did? I was breathing. Next time you're upset, take a minute to just breathe. Just breathe in and out. Then speak."

What my dad suggested is a form of mindfulness, a particular way of paying attention to a present experience -- in this case, a sensory experience. In many situations since, this mindful minute has helped me filter my reactions to others. It has helped me cultivate better relationships.

What took me much longer to learn was that the relationship I really needed to nurture was one with myself. My harshest reactions were those provoked by my inner monologue. Little molehills (an upcoming test, a worried thought) blew up into mountains of anxiety. Had I honed the ability to turn the tool of mindfulness inward earlier, I'm confident that I could have prevented many downward spirals of negativity.

While I can't go back in time to give little Renee these tools, I now have the privilege of working with amazing children and teaching them skills of resilience and mindfulness. One thing I know from my work is that mindful children react differently to challenges. To show you exactly what I mean, I've created a few illustrations.

First, what is mindfulness?

What is Mindfulness?

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in a present moment and non-judgmentally.

Mindfulness also involves acceptance. This means paying attention to thoughts and feelings without judging or reacting to them.

When you're mindful, there is no "right" or "wrong" way to think or feel in a particular moment.



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What does a mindful minute look like?

A Mindful Minute

There are lots of ways to take a mindful minute.

"What if I fail the test?"
I have a worried thought
It's drifting by.
It's okay, I know it's
temporary. I don't
have to react to it.
I am not my thoughts.

I'm paying attention
to my breath. That's it.
I'm observing my breath
and if my mind wanders,
that's okay. I'll just come
back to my breath.



I'm bringing myself
back from a worried
future thought to
the present by getting
in touch with my
senses. What do I
touch, taste, smell,
hear and see in
this moment?

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Before mindfulness training, challenging events can provoke quick reactions.

Before Mindfulness Training

Yuck, gum!



I'm so mad!



Event

A problem
or challenge



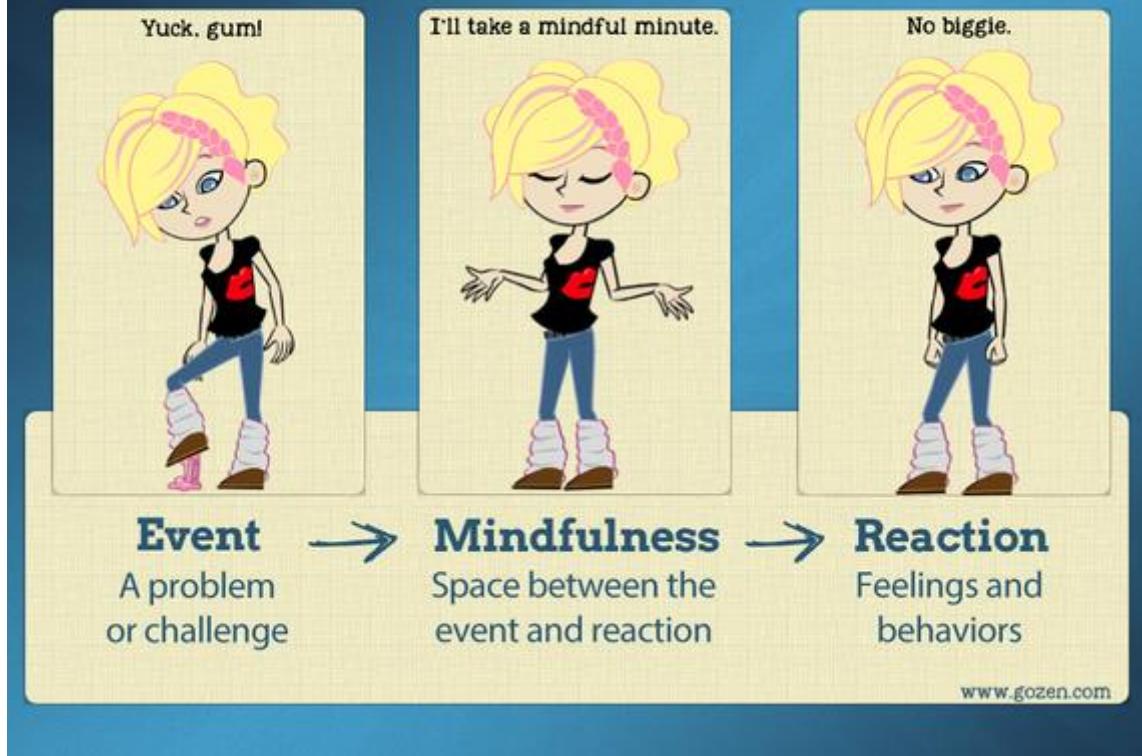
Reaction

Feelings and
behaviors

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After mindfulness training, you can pause and create space between an event and your reaction. This transforms knee-jerk reactions into thoughtful responses.

After Mindfulness Training



Before mindfulness training, a thought may lead to anxious feelings and behaviors.

Before Mindfulness Training

What if I fail the test?



I'm so worried.



Event

A problem
or challenge



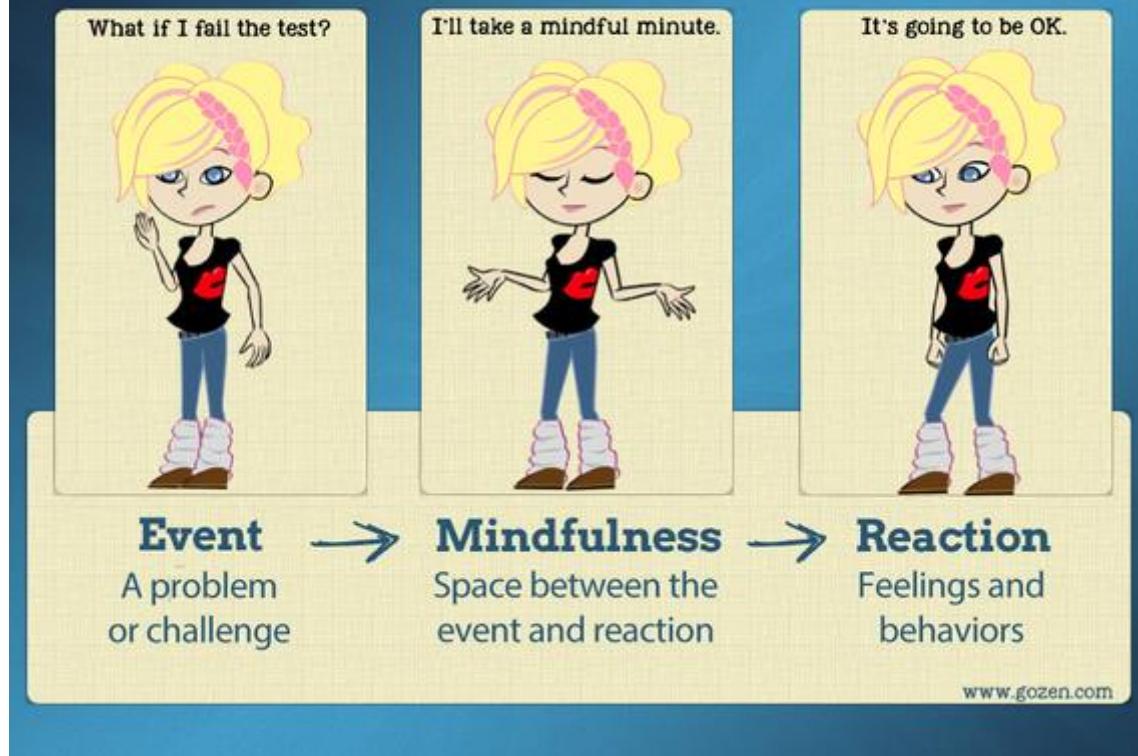
Reaction

Feelings and
behaviors

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After mindfulness training, you are skilled at halting an anxious response in its tracks.

After Mindfulness Training



You'll notice that throughout this article, I've used the words mindfulness "training." This is because mindfulness is a skill which any child or adult can sharpen with practice. It's a skill which the [research](#) shows can improve impulse control, calmness, kindness, patience, compassion, empathy, executive function and attention spans in children. It's a skill we can give the next generation of kids to not only connect more deeply with others around them, but to really nurture a sense of self-respect and self-compassion.

Teach your kids anxiety relief and mindfulness techniques with fun, animated lessons at www.gozen.com